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ABSTRACT

When writing laboratories first opened over 30 years ago, only a few faculty members and administrators had a firm notion of what constituted a writing center, and these notions differed from campus to campus. The pioneers of the discipline had little beyond instinct and imagination to guide them--and a nagging notion that there is one true path to teaching writing competence. Yet, there are a staggering number of methods, theories, and approaches in the composition laboratory discipline. Certainly it is time that members of this discipline pause to take an honest and critical look at the profession and admit that they are still pioneers. Writing center directors have failed to answer even the most basic questions: What is a writing laboratory? and What does one do in a writing laboratory? In view of the confusion and overlap, critics of the writing laboratory have a right to question claims of success, which are often supported with statistics unrelated to students' increased abilities to write. But the future of the laboratory discipline is encouraging, if the history of other disciplines is a valid model. A field of inquiry, like basic writing, goes through an immature stage marked by controversies, but with gradual advances in knowledge, a consensus builds up that shapes the discipline into a genuine intellectual community. (HTH)

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NOTES FROM THE FRONTIER JOURNAL OF A WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR

Despite the fact that some writing laboratories, such as the one at the University of Iowa, have been in existence for 30 years or more, at most colleges the writing center is a relatively new venture. Furthermore, a majority of these laboratories have been funded not in a spirit of academic optimism, but rather as a last resort in the battle against illiteracy. For example, consider Patrick Hartwell's description of the birth of the writing laboratory at the University of Michigan at Flint: "Well," the department head said, pushing the chair back from the desk and pausing for a moment, 'nothing else seems to work; we might as well try a writing lab.' And so we did."¹

For Patrick Hartwell and for hundreds of other writing center directors across the country, the paint was still drying on the doors when the first crush of students appeared for tutoring and guidance. As a result, these laboratory directors often faced an identity crisis that easily could be predicted: only a small number of administrators, faculty members, and students had a firm notion of what constitutes a writing center. In addition, these vague notions differed from building to building and from campus to campus. As if these complications were not enough, the writing lab directors themselves began their modest programs without any formal organizations or journals devoted entirely to their pedagogical concerns. Consequently, like a hundred different species of wildflowers, the writing centers burst forth across America, exhibiting a remarkable variety of colors, shapes, and forms.

The pioneers of our discipline had little beyond instinct and imagination to guide them when they began their attacks against rapidly-plummeting SAT

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scores and other disturbing signs of the literacy crisis. They sought consistency and growth in the only ways possible: exchanging letters and phonecalls, trading discoveries in coffee shops, swapping bibliographies at NCTE meetings. And like all pioneers, they milled about the frontier waiting for rumors of gold and greener pastures. In the process they followed dry beds and dusty trails, discovering, among other things, that the pioneering spirit flags noticeably between successes. However, the laboratory directors probably shared two ideas: first, a confident faith that life on the frontier, despite its travails, is better than life in the Big City of Traditional Rhetoric; and second, a nagging notion that there is One True Path to teaching writing competence.

I first encountered the Eureka Syndrome, the belief in the One True Path, when I attended, as a graduate student, my first Conference on College Composition and Communication. With pen and notepad I wandered into a session on basic writing and sat in the back. Although the first two speakers were interesting enough, I cannot recall today what either had to say. The third speaker, however, I cannot forget. She was a sweet little old lady who waited patiently, knitting methodically, as the other presenters spoke. As the second speaker concluded, she put aside her needles and yarn, gathered up her visual aids and her volumes of notes, and pitry-patted up to the lectern in a way that only little old ladies can do without appearing to be parodies of little old ladies. Then, in a voice that startled even those who were napping in the corners, she yelled, "Eureka! I have found it!"

Unfortunately, everyone soon realized that the little old lady had not found it any more successfully than speakers one and two. But she did instigate my thinking about the furious search for it, the One True Path,

that characterizes both the larger study of rhetoric and composition--of which the writing center is a part--and the isolated laboratory programs of our own pioneers. In the composition laboratory discipline, we encounter a staggering number of methods, theories, and approaches; consequently, there is a constant scrambling, among our members, toward some firm ground from which to strike a vantage point. Just when the writing center director feels some security with one approach or method, a new wave comes along, and everyone else scrambles onto that particular rock: sentence combining, tagmemics, the generative rhetoric of the sentence, sentence chunks, Burke's pentad, peer-group tutoring, Peter Elbow's delicious method of cooking up compositions, and programed tapes from the Educulture Corporation, to name a few.² Although each of these innovations has its place in the composition laboratory, problems occur when the director, suffering the natural consequences of an identity crisis, introduces new methods and materials because they are rumored successful; often the search for the One True Path sacrifices efficiency and consistency in the laboratory.

Certainly it is time that members of the Writing Centers Association pause to take an honest and critical look at our profession, to admit that we are still pioneers. As The Writing Lab Newsletter has demonstrated in issue after issue, most directors have different notions of what works in the laboratory and what does not, what theories are workable and which are not. In the meantime, the center directors, as a group, have failed to answer even the most basic questions: What is a writing laboratory? What do you do in a writing laboratory? Why don't you do what she does in her writing laboratory? Why do we need to do this in a laboratory? Can it be done at all? How do you measure what it is that you do in the lab... once you've done it? Unfortunately, although most writing center directors

can generate pages of statistics about the lab, most of these numbers serve simply to show that students arrived, stayed for x minutes or hours, and departed with handouts a, b, and c. Our fascination with record-keeping is merely a sign of the relative insecurity that laboratory directors feel about the directions that they are taking.

When Mina Shaughnessy surveyed the literature on methods of teaching "basic" writing in 1976, she underscored the depth of confusion in that field by pointing out that "the teaching of writing to severely unprepared freshmen is as yet but the frontier of a profession, lacking even an agreed upon name."³ Of course, Shaughnessy coined the term "basic writing" that is now a convention across America; laboratory specialists, however, have not progressed even that far. To demonstrate this point, I have pulled from my correspondence files an abbreviated list of the names by which we identify our services: the Writing Center, the Writing Laboratory, the Learning Resource Center, the Writing Room, the Developmental Writing Program, the Basic Writers' Laboratory, the Developmental Writing Program, the Study Skills Center, the Academic Support Center, the Learning Center, the Composition Corner, the Writing Place, the Writing Haven, the Reading and Writing Laboratory, the Reading and Study Skills Lab (RASSL), the Composition Corner, and the Composition Closet.

Names, of course, unimportant as they are, have little to do with the practical functioning of these laboratories. That is where the real divergence becomes clear. For example, some writing centers open their doors only to special admissions students; others only to students in freshman writing classes; still others to members of the campus at-large. In some universities full professors staff the laboratory; in others graduate students do the work; still others employ undergraduates as tutors. Some

labs dispense advice on grammar and usage; others stress prewriting and invention; still others feature spelling, vocabulary, and study skills. Some labs do all these things; others do none. Some center directors keep vigorous appointments schedules and gather students into the quiet mausoleums of the library; others encourage free-wheeling, anarchistic centers of interchange where the raised voices of students echo among the hollows of converted boilerrooms. Around the country the writing center may be the matrix for sign language classes, telephone "hotlines," speed-reading programs, newspaper columns on writing, poetry contests, English as a Second Language classes, and LSAT cram sessions. In a certain sense, it is amazing that, when the Writing Centers Association calls its annual conference, the people concerned recognize themselves as the ones being summoned, labs being as different as they are.

And yet, although many different varieties of wildflowers grow on the prairie, no traveler will exclude the most unusual plants from the genus of the "wildflower." We do share common concerns and goals. However, as Shaughnessy says, the only evidence of our common goals so far is "a miscellany of articles on what has been working, or appears to have been working, in a variety of places, with a variety of teachers and pedagogies. We find among the articles much that has been going on in freshman English for years."⁴ Shaughnessy's implications for the laboratory approach are painfully valid. We have been discovering and rediscovering the truths of our narrow discipline independently, as the wheel must have been invented in a hundred different villages over the span of several centuries.

In view of all this repetition and confusion, critics of the laboratory process have a right to question our claims of success, especially since these claims are often supported by piles of statistics that speak to issues

unrelated to the students' increased abilities to write. Furthermore, scholars who make claims for the efficacy of tutorial programs seldom do more than voice polemics in support of a single, isolated program that has no imitators in other parts of the country. Indeed, those who debunk the laboratory approach point correctly to the lack of consistency and unity in our efforts. However, while five years ago the writing center languished in a pedagogical bedlam, today it merely stands in a state of healthy disarray. That is, despite having no clear sense of identity, the writing center directors share a grubby yellow pad full of assumptions about the efficacy of the tutorial method--assumptions that imply a nascent academic community.

In fact, we should be encouraged by the prospects for the future of the laboratory discipline if the history of other disciplines is a valid model. E. D. Hirsch, borrowing phrases from Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, says that a field of inquiry, like basic writing, goes through two principal stages of growth:

The first stage, called "immature," is where "a number of schools compete for the domination of a given field." This period is marked by controversies like our own, in which people "confronting the same phenomena describe and interpret them in different ways." With the gradual advance of knowledge, the conflicts subside, and a consensus builds up which forms the discipline into a genuine intellectual community. Members of this community can then take the foundations of their field for granted and can therefore direct their attention to the problems and subproblems to be solved. The community can also agree among themselves whether a particular piece of work can be

assimilated and integrated with the rest so that the frontiers of the discipline are pushed back in a clearly understood way.⁵

Although Hirsch is talking about composition in a larger sense than do the laboratory specialists, his observations are every bit as valid for the laboratory interest-group. This stage of slow and random growth is a necessary step in the evolution of an identifiable academic community.

Although the laboratory directors agree on very little in terms of procedures and methods, most share a frontier faith in the general concept of tutorial education. Therefore, even in the face of competition, bickering, and confusion, the signs of healthy progress are notable on many fronts. First, writing center faculty are seeking and gaining an identity through a number of organizations across the country. For instance, in Dallas at the 1981 Conference on College Composition and Communication, members of the writing laboratory profession met to make formal application to the National Council of Teachers of English for recognition as a Special Interest Group, with rights and responsibilities under the parent organization. Also, in various corners of the country, groups like the Writing Centers Association and the Southeastern Writing Centers Association are meeting regularly to draw up constitutions, opinion papers, and battle-plans of many types. Second, the tutors and directors are contributing, in larger and larger numbers, to various newsletters around the country, writing articles that show an increasing sophistication and awareness of critical issues in rhetoric. For example, the once-modest Writing Lab Newsletter, published by Muriel Harris at Purdue University, now boasts a subscription list of more than 900 people, some from countries as far away as Portugal and Saudi Arabia. Where the Newsletter originally printed only a handful of chatty how-to-do-it summaries, the Purdue publication now features book reviews,

bibliographies, critical articles, and a potpourri of materials that suggest an intellectual community with wide research interests. Third, the writing lab specialists have created the need for two new journals devoted primarily to the concerns of their membership: The Writing Instructor and The Writing Center Journal. First printed in January of 1981, the Writing Center Journal in its initial issue presented articles on several important issues, including prewriting for the lab and sentence-combining for the lab. Even though these beginnings are modest, they are no more modest than those undertaken by the National Council of Teachers of English in its early and formative years.

Both Hirsch and Shaughnessy use the term "frontier" to describe the future of basic writing programs; I think it important for writing center directors to adopt that term in our attempts to articulate the obstacles that impede progress for us. In any endeavor, moving the boundaries of any frontier is difficult because the pioneers get caught up in the mundane details of daily life, neglecting to pay adequate attention to the need for continual progress. Although most historians are fond of making the overland treks of American discovery sound vastly heroic, I doubt that the pioneers would have seen themselves as extraordinary in any sense. Indeed, a wealth of folklore suggests that the great westward movements of people and wagons were unified and directed, and that each wagon train had a Brigham Young who knew precisely when to stand and yell, "This is the place!" But we all know what it really must have been like on the frontier: people who battled the land and the elements did not consider themselves adventuresome voyagers, only victims of some injustice or unhappiness who were setting out in a new direction, mostly disorganized, and with only a vague sense of where the mules were taking them. In fact, they probably spent most of their

time doing the wash, skinning hides, building campfires, and shooting at one another. Finally, they ceased ~~their~~ searches not because they had any sense of having reached the Promised Land, but only because they could not fix one more broken axle or climb over one more mountain.

So it is on this frontier. For the writing center director, each Monday is another day with students to teach, tutors to direct, forms to complete, budgets to compute. As we plod along, our concerns with the mundane details of daily life tend to obscure our view of the paths ahead. Furthermore, whenever we meet on these trails, we are forced to admit that, here on the frontier, we are a motley group: psychologists, educationists, teachers of the handicapped and disabled, sociologists, Ph.D.'s in literature, business writers, speech pathologists, teachers of English as a foreign language, scientists, and humanists. We espouse many theories and owe religious devotion to many creeds and persuasions. And, although we know better, insecurity often makes us prone to empire-building. Along the trails we recognize, lurking in the bush, a common enemy: an elitist group of tenured professors who want to deny the existence of basic writers, who want to view composition as product rather than process. But we cannot seem to get organized against this common foe, partly because our numbers are so diverse and partly because the enemy holds all the high ground. And, after all, we have clothes to wash, and hides to skin, and fires to build; and occasionally we find it necessary to take a potshot at one of our fellow travelers. Nevertheless, gradually and almost imperceptibly, as we agree and disagree, fight and learn, we are taking a few steps forward, so that the boundary of our knowledge inches ever further west.

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FOOTNOTES

¹Patrick Hartwell, "A Writing Laboratory Model," in Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators, ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoeber (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1989), p. 63.

²For an updated bibliography on sentence combining and the writing laboratory, see William L. Stull, "The Hartford Sentence-Combining Laboratory: From Theory to Program" The Writing Center Journal, 1 (1980), 20-33; for tagmemics as a method of invention, see Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); for sentence chunks, see the recent publications of Frank O'Hare, esp. O'Hare and Dean Memering, The Writer's Work (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980); for the pentad, see Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945); for peer-group tutoring, see Ken Bruffee, "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Influence," Liberal Education 64 (1978); the analogy between cooking and writing is pursued in Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); for Richard Veit's response to increased laboratory use of taped materials such as the programs sold by the Educulture Corporation, see "Are Machines the Answer?" The Writing Lab Newsletter, 4 (December, 1979), 1.

³Shaughnessy, "Basic Writing" in Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Forth Worth, Texas: TCU Press, 1976), p. 137.

⁴Shaughnessy, p. 147.

⁵E. Donald Hirsch, Jr. "Research in Writing: the Issues," in Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators, ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoebler (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1980), p. 154. Hirsch quotes Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).